Bella Coola Indians - Chapter VII

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BP-0054/007(33)

Period of Engagement.

When the parents of the young man (whom it will be convenient to term X.) ~~in this section)~~ have at last decided on a suitable partner, they ~~must~~ next choose an ~~suitable~~ intermediary for the first proposal. In all these discussions the elderly relatives of the parents take a leading part, and especially their own parents if alive. Sometimes ~~the~~ X.'s father himself interviews the father of the girl (whom it will be convenient to term Y.) ~~in this section),~~ at other times he asks some friend to do so. The matter is not supposed to be generally known, and the intermediary goes ~~quietly~~ to Y.'s father's house, and quietly tells ~~Y.'s~~ her parents that X.'s family would like their daughter to become X's wife. This preliminary asking is done unostentatiously, at any time and in any place, and the messenger withdraws after giving his message. In all probability Y.'s family have already received information of the proposed marriage, but they always plead ignorance, and ~~discuss the proposal~~ deliberate for several days. ~~Her~~ Y.'s parents and ~~their~~ other relatives take part in the discussion, and Y. herself may likewise be taken into confidence. Although a daughter has, theoretically, little choice, in practice she exercises a great deal of influence. Her mother and father weigh the suitor's eligibility not only with regard to wealth and ancestral possessions, but consider his character. An immoral young man is not desirable, though neither is one who is impotent. ~~There are no definite rules as to the number of relatives consulted, nor does this depend on their exact relationship.~~

If Y.'s relatives agree to the proposal, some one of them informs the intermediary of X.'s father, and the ~~two~~ young people are considered to be engaged. The fact is supposed to be kept secret for several days, although the news usually becomes known. X.'s relatives as soon as possible take a number of presents to Y.'s family. These are given in private, and are termed "secret gifts;" they are said to give strength to the future children. Since no witnesses are present, it follows that no social prestige ~~xxxxxx~~ accrues from the transaction. ~~It must be emphasised that that~~ The relatives included in the "family" of either ~~xxxx~~ X. or Y. are not always the same. ~~Xxxxxxxxxxx~~ Uncles, aunts, grandparents, may or may not take part in the giving and receiving of presents, the parents alone always do so. Sometimes most distant relatives take a leading part in the arrangements, either in hope of ~~gxxx~~ receiving valuable gifts, or to obtain social influence by lavish giving. If X.'s relatives have reason to believe that Y.'s family will accept their proposal, several of them may go in company and actually carry the "secret gifts" to Y.'s house at the time of making the first proposal. Should this be

rejected, they merely carry away their goods, and as the affair has been private, no one's vanity has been hurt.

The acceptance of "secret gifts" binds the engagement of X. and Y., ~~it is next necessary to make this public. X.'s father may take advantage of a kusiut dance, potlatch, or any other ceremony when guests have assembled for the announcement, but if none should take place within a few days, he is expected to summon his fellow-villagers to his house. If his supplied of food are limited, only chiefs are invited, otherwise all and sundry.~~ X.'s and Y.'s fathers make speeches describing the fame of their ancestors, and how they are to be bound even more closely together by an event which is to take place — the marriage of X. and Y. The guests express polite surprise. The singers, who are ~~in attendance as usual~~ but a few days elapse before this is made public. If X'.s family is wealthy, his father, or other near relative, presently invites all the inhabitants of the village to his house. The singers, ~~who are~~ in their usual stations behind the fire, strike up the tune of some kusiut and the owner of the song, thus warned, dances in time to it. Using their own discretion, the singers proceed to beat out the time for kusiut ~~and~~ after kusiut, and each performs. In like fashion they then beat out the tune of ~~a~~ one s.sack after ~~a sack~~ another, and ~~in time to the music the~~ each member of that society gives his dance. Since none of the supernatural beings are present, the affair is non-sacred. The singers consult with ~~X.~~ the host as to the number of songs to be used. When they at last stop, X.'s father, aided by his younger relatives, gives valuable presents of food. No mention of the coming marriage is made, in fact, the ~~sole point of~~ reasons for the rite ~~is~~ are that it gives ~~X.~~ the donor an opportunity of displaying his generosity as a chief and ~~Further, it~~ indirectly increases the importance of the marriage, because the value of the food will later be remembered in connection with it.

If X.'s father is very wealthy, he may recall the people for several nights, always providing the same type of entertainment, and always giving food. He uses his own discretion as to the number of such entertainments, but at that which he decides shall be the last, he announces:

"To-morrow we shall go to Y.'s father's house."

If X.'s father does not wish to give away such large quantities of food he may omit the

dancing in his own house and make this announcement at a potlatch, a kusiut dance, or any other public gathering. But the more elaborate the ceremonial, the greater is the importance of the marriage in the eyes of the Bella Coola, which in turn increases ~~and consequently~~ the ~~importance~~ the strength of ~~the~~ children who may result from it. ~~is greater.~~

On the morning after this announcement X.'s father calls to his house those whom he wishes to be witnesses of the marriage agreement. These include as many of his relatives, and those of his wife, as he desires, and often intimate friends. These individuals comprise the group interested, on behalf of X., in the marriage; they provide the goods which are given for him, and receive the presents from the corresponding group of Y.'s relatives. Anyone having the necessary financial ability is glad of this opportunity to demonstrate it, but a poor man can decline without loss of social esteem.

Carrying presents, ~~although their~~ the specific value of which is immaterial, they set out for Y.'s house. Y.'s father, accompanied ~~his~~ by his relatives, has been warned and is waiting at the door. A herald, or other eloquent speaker, addresses ~~them~~ on behalf of X.'s father. He says in effect:

"We do not come secretly or wrongfully to steal something from you. We come with the loftiest intentions. Great is our affection for your child. What we are about to do has long been a practice of our two families (1), let us do according to our wishes. I am the opening." (2).

Then X.'s father throws on the ground beside the door several stones, representing slaves who will later be given to Y.'s relatives. These are said to "open the door", that is, to make clear the entrance of X. and his relatives into Y.'s house. There is the added significance that they open a clear passage for the children whom it is hoped will result from the marriage. This thought finds expression in many rites both during engagement and at the wedding ceremony itself. After throwing the stones, X.'s father gives gifts to Y., to her father, her mother, and ~~her~~ other relatives ~~there~~ assembled. These are of ~~very~~ such

(1). If the two families have intermarried in past generations.
(2). Opening, skɛlɛwadjut. This is the term applied to the whole ceremony at Y.'s house, and, like it, ~~It~~ has a double significance, as opening the way for the marriage, and ~~likewise~~ clearing the path for the future children.

great value, ~~so great~~ that X.'s father sometimes almost impoverishes himself. But he knows that though these will never actually be returned, ~~yet~~ it will be a matter of pride to Y.'s family to uphold their dignity, and the importance of Y., by equally lavish givings.

Y.'s father now invites his guests to enter his house, and ushers them ~~seats~~ ~~according~~ to their duly validated seats. Food has been prepared, and this is now served with all solemnity in the usual food-boxes. Then Y.'s family give presents to X.'s family, that is to all who have come to share in the marriage. These goods are known as "working clothes"; they are usually of less value than the presents just given by X.'s relatives, though occasionally they may exceed them. Y.'s father, or a herald or an eloquent friend on his behalf, makes a speech to the following effect:

"Be bold. Henceforth you will have to work a very long time for us. We will let you know when we need your services."

The significance of this speech lies in the fact that X., and to a certain extent his relatives, are expected to perform almost menial tasks for Y.'s father during the period of engagement, which has now been duly ratified. X.'s father and his followers now leave Y.'s house. It is immaterial whether or not X. and Y. themselves have been present. It is important that this formal acknowledgement ~~ratification~~ of the engagement should take place during the day; ~~as~~ otherwise any children resulting from the marriage could be shamed by having it said to them:

"Your parents were not married in the open light of day."

For a varying length of time X. now acts almost as a servant to Y.'s father. He does not live with her family, ~~them~~, but he cuts wood, draws water, and performs other menial tasks. Whenever a member of X.'s family gives a ceremony, he takes care to give lavish presents to Y.'s relatives. If it is impossible to hold a sacred rite, ~~give any ceremony~~, X.'s father is at least expected to invite Y.'s family to ceremonial feasts, and also to share with them any game that he may kill. Meanwhile, X. and Y. are ~~do~~ not subject to ~~observe~~ any restrictions as to seeing each other. In theory if they should hold sexual intercourse it would "spoil" the engagement, but in most cases when this occurs, as it often does, the matter is simply hushed up. ~~The longer the period of engagement, the It is felt that a long engagement is proper, since it gives strength to the resultant children.~~

for whom the way is clear through life.
No particular period of time is necessary; ~~xx~~ if X. and Y. are the children of very great chiefs, their engagement may be announced while still small children, though this is not usually done until a few years after puberty. Then the period of waiting is about two years

S. Do you mean the grand children of X & Y?

~~The offspring of~~ Children whose parents were long engaged are said to be "heavy"; their entry into life ~~has~~ having been ~~xxx~~ prepared ~~for~~ with careful thought and due ceremony, so that their limbs are clear to travel with success ~~the path of life~~ to the position of chief. When such a child is born, the relatives are eager to call their fellow-villagers to confer a name soon after birth, and the infant starts with an advantage in the complicated struggle of life. There is no specific ~~time period~~ length of time for engagement; if X. and ~~xx~~ Y. are the children of very influential chiefs, ~~they~~ preliminary agreement may have been made while they were still only seven or eight years old, though the actual marriage never occurs before the age of seventeen or eighteen. More often the agreement is made when ~~the~~ X. and Y. have passed the age of puberty, and they then wait for about two years before marrying.

As has been said, throughout this period, X. is expected to give at least feasts at which Y.'s relatives are the guests of honour and always receive presents. At one of these rites X.'s father, with the concurrence of his relatives, may mark his approval of the coming event by bestowing on Y.'s father, or one of her other relations, one of the ancestral names embodied in his family myth. ~~In such a case the presentation is always agreed to by all the members of X.'s family. A name so bestowed~~ This does not become the absolute property of Y.'s family, since the myth in which it is embodied does not belong to them, unless, of course, they are members of the same ancestral family. It is fitting that a name of this kind be bestowed by the recipient on one of Y.'s children, and returned to X.'s family a few generations later by ~~the institution of~~ a return marriage. If this is not done, in course of time the name ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ is apt to be regarded by Y.'s family as their own. ~~A common source of trouble is when~~ If there are no children, ~~Then~~ Y.'s relatives should return the name to X.'s family, but there are many instances of feuds caused by their failure to do so. According to mythology, prerogatives may sometimes be given outright, without thought of their use by the resultant children or of their being restored by return marriages. It is claimed that the people of the

Kinsquit River have through such a present, the inalienable right to use a certain spot in the Kitlobe River for their olachen nets, and likewise the Kitlobe people have ~~the inalienable right~~ inevocable title to the Kinsquit name ~~at~~ Stältimx. These two prerogatives were transferred at the beginning of time. (1). At present, anyone bestowing outright his family prerogatives would be considered weak-minded. In fact, it would be virtually impossible to do so since the other members of the ancestral family would strenuously object. It is considerations of this sort that make it so desirable to seek a wife ~~from~~ within the ranks of the ancestral family.

Likewise, during the period of engagement, Y.'s father may ~~give~~ present a name, or names, to X.'s father, with the same conditions as those just described. It must be borne in mind that the giving of ~~these~~ these at this time is not obligatory, nor does it affect the validity of the coming marriage. It is merely a mark of friendly feeling between the two groups of relatives, and, ~~this~~ by adding to the importance of the event, ~~and this increases~~ increases the potential strength of ~~the~~ childrenx ~~to~~ yet unborn.

If either X. or Y. should die during the period of engagement, the presents, or their equivalent, must be returned to the donors. ~~Therefore~~ No judicial methods are employed to effect this, but the force of public opinion is always sufficiently strong to compel a chief to do that which is proper, since otherwise he would lose much of his prestige. If Y. should die, an effort is made to ~~find~~ replace her with a sister, ~~or~~ cousin, or other near relative, so that the friendly relations entered upon ~~by~~ by the two families may not be ~~wrecked~~ lost. The presents mutually given by the two families may be returned and re-donated or, more simply, the substitute merely takes Y.'s place without further arrangement. Sometimes, in spite of the wishes of their parents and the elaborate rites carried out, either X. or Y. breaks the engagement by going to live with somebody else. It is then a mark of pride for the family of the offender to return the gifts they have received, and almost equally a mark of honour for the aggrieved party to return ~~the present~~ What they have received, in order to demonstrate how little value they ~~put to~~ place on the possession of goods.

Desirable though it is to have a lengthy engagement, it is often necessary to curtail ~~this~~ it. If, for example, one of X.'s relatives should die during the period of

(1). See p.

~~[illegible]~~

~~engagement, Y.'s father may suggest a speedy marriage ceremony. He knows that X.'s~~ family will have heavy expenses in connection with the burial and mourning rites, hence it is a courtesy to offer a quick marriage with the financial advantages accruing to them at the actual ceremony. In this case, X. either does not work at all for Y.'s family, or only for a short period. Moreover, if Y. reaches marriageable age without her father receiving suitable proposals, he can himself take the initiative by consulting the parents of an eligible young man. If the suggestion is agreeable, the engagement is announced in the manner already described, and the marriage takes place as soon as possible. Though strictly legal, and commonly practised even long ago, this is not considered a desirable preliminary, since the children lack the strength which would have been theirs if their parents had been long engaged. In recent years the custom of short engagements has become popular, though the older Bella Coola feel, resent, that the woman is simply bought by the payment of goods or money at the actual wedding. The return of such sums in due course does not alter the fact that the woman has been obtained without the lengthy period of engagement. A few years ago a powerful chief even "bought" husbands for his granddaughters. His influence was so great that by bestowing large sums on the families of the youths they accepted the young women as wives. The girls in question were desirable in every way, according to Bella Coola standards, but by marrying without a long engagement and suitable presents the husbands, and their families, failed to live up to the dignity of their ancestry. These are breakings down of the ancient rites, and as such are lamented by the older people.

Sometimes, despite the wishes of their parents, a boy and girl decide to marry, and annnounce their intention by living together. After much storming, the parents usually decide to make the best of a bad business by performing the marriage rites as soon as possible, and by lavish expenditure on them to lessen the impediment placed against the unborn children by lack of long engagement of their parents. But such a child can never be called an ätqin, which has the significance of something good that has long been sought for, such as a smooth grained tree that carpenters like. It will thus be seen the marriage ceremony must be carried out, irrespective of whether it has been preceded by a lengthy period of engagement or not in which the first proposal was made by the boy's family, by a shorter period in which the girl's family

took the initiative, or by no period of engagement whatever. These rites can now be described.

Marriage Rites.

Y.'s family make the decision as to when the period of engagement shall be terminated. Although it is considered undignified for X. or his relatives to attempt to hurry them in this matter, unquestionably there is always a certain amount of urging. Y.'s father has strong reasons for procrastination. a long engagement strengthens the status of the children whom his daughter may bear, and besides, he frequently receives presents from X.'s relatives. As Y.'s relatives will have to bear the heavier part of the expenses of the wedding, it is sometimes necessary for them to delay it for years while saving the requisite goods. The ceremony may take place at any time of the year. Foreign guests are occasionally invited, but usually only the members of X.'s and Y.'s village are present. Of course if the marriage should be with the child of a foreign chief his relatives and friends take part in the ceremony. When Y.'s relatives decide that they are ready, they choose the actual day after consultation with X.'s family, though the assumption is that Y.'s father merely informs X.'s father of the date.

It is incumbent on X.'s family to proclaim the event on the day preceding the ceremony. In the late afternoon his father sends a herald through the village calling out:

"Qwimap, ye chiefs! Qwimap, ye wives of chiefs! Qwimap, ye commoners!"

The actual meaning of qwimap is unknown, though its significance is well understood, namely, that it is an invitation to gather for the announcement of a wedding. In conjunction with the summons, X.'s ancestral name is used, although all in the village are probably well aware of what is about to take place. It is noteworthy that at a marriage the guests, as well as the participants, are called by the ancestral names, as opposed to their kusiut by which individuals who are generally known. Red coloring is much in evidence at weddings; the heralds smear their faces with red paint, while the guests similarly tint themselves. They wear collars, wristlets and anklets of undyed cedar-bark, and cover themselves with eagle down.

In the gathering dusk all assemble in X.'s house; Y.'s relatives attend or not as they wish. X.'s father would feel insulted if anyone else should stay away.

come without a valid excuse, but in point of fact everyone is eager to enjoy an evening's entertainment. The singers take their accustomed places behind the fire and the guests range themselves in the house without deference to rank. The singers strike up the kusiut song of anyone present, and the person so indicated dances. The first tune used is frequently that of X.'s father, ~~and~~ then that of his mother, but there is no fixed rule about this. ~~on the point~~. Still choosing as they will, the singers beat out tune after tune, and guest after guest dances. Since none of the supernatural beings are present, the affair is, ~~of course~~, of a non-sacred nature. After exhausting the most popular kusiut songs, the singers beat out the sisaok songs of ~~one of~~ ~~the guest~~ many of the guests who, in succession, dance to them. The songs of shamans are used in like fashion. Sometimes the singers continue until everyone present has danced, at other times they curtail the ceremony, as they think fit. When they decide to stop they intimate this to X.'s father who superintends the distribution to ~~some kind of~~ ~~of food, of any kind, to~~ ~~among~~ the guests of whatever kind of food has been provided.

During the course of the meal, a fluent speaker stands up and expounds on behalf of X.'s father the ancestral myth in which his son's ancestral name is embodied. Sometimes X.'s father acts as his own orator, but usually a herald is called upon. The intimate details are not given, merely sufficient to show the importance of X. The myth may ~~be~~ either be one of the most ancient type dealing with the first settlement of this earth, or one of later date describing the exploits of X.'s ~~revered~~ famous ancestors. As ~~will be seen in~~ shown by the examples of these origin myths given in Chapter V, each contains an account of a marriage. It is ~~always~~ ~~generally~~ always known, although not generally described, ~~in the myth~~, that at each of these marriages a number of dancers performed, their number varying between two and eighteen. The orator, when outlining the myth, stresses this portion of it, and always announces the number of dancers; ~~so employed;~~ with the statement that X. will use a like number on the morrow. In the same manner the fluent speaker ~~likewise~~ outlines a myth belonging to the ancestral family of ~~XX~~ X.'s mother, again with emphasis on the number of dancers used by her ancestors. X., as a member of both ancestral families, can combine his rights to dancers from both sides, ~~sources~~, but ~~though~~ it is customary for him to use no more than five or six ~~dancers~~. If it should happen that X. has no right to dancers from either ~~his~~ mother or father, an almost unthinkable situation, he is able to borrow the prerogative of using some

4)

Penrhyn Island

Canoes with one outrigger of small planks sewn with sennet. IV 27

from friends. The sentiment on which this oration of myths is based is ~~that~~ the one so often mentioned: it marks the close relationship between the future children ~~as yet unborn~~ and their noble ancestors of old, ~~the former~~ ~~Thus are they strengthened.~~ a source of strength to the former.

X.'s father now names those whom he wishes to assist him on the following day. These are the dancers, who are selected primarily ~~according to~~ for their skill in dancing, and secondarily in accordance with their rank. ~~a preference for chiefs.~~ With them he selects a number of persons to stand near ~~them~~ and cherish them as they dance. He also asks the services ~~assistance~~ of some of the women who are professional droners; of ~~whoever is~~ the keeper of the marriage song ~~handed down from antiquity in~~ of his ancestral family; and, finally, of a number of men to sit near the singers and assist them with suggestions. It would be most exceptional for anyone so chosen to decline the honour. It is near morning by this time and the guests depart.

On the following morning, the actual wedding day ~~of the marriage itself~~, X.'s father calls to his house those ~~whom he had~~ selected the previous evening as dancers and their assistants. The dancers wear blankets decorated with small copper ornaments (1) and carry circular wooden rattles provided with handles. Their clothing and rattles may be their own, but if they do not possess suitable attire, it is incumbent on X.'s father to provide ~~them~~ such. Skins are piled up within the house, and some of these are said to "make soft the handles of the rattles". The symbolism is, of course, that these pelts are pads to protect the hands. In practice the dancers derive no benefit from the skins, since these are merely piled with others for later distribution to Y.'s family. A large amount of food has been prepared and placed in boxes, one for each member of Y.'s family. It is often difficult to estimate how much food ~~many boxes~~ will be required, and if ~~it is found that~~ there is a surplus, it is eaten by ~~are too many,~~ the dancers and other assistants. ~~eat the surplus.~~

When all are in readiness they rush forth; dancers, dancers' assistants and young relatives of X., followed more sedately by his father. ~~X's father~~. The rest of the vil-

(1). At the present time there is uncertainty as to the proper clothing of a marriage dancer. Several informants stated that it was a copper decorated blanket, while others said that there was no special attire; ~~and~~ one man claimed that an attempt was made to imitate the form and costume of X.'s first ancestor, and another that si saok costume was used. Probably there was no uniformity in custom.